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NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WAR

By STEPHEN LEACOCK

THE months through which we are now passing are critical for the fate of the British Empire. The war has lasted nearly two years and a half. There is no sign of an end. Our enemies have devastated Belgium and enslaved its people. They have overrun Poland and taken to themselves its vast resources in corn and food. The iron of Lorraine, the salt mines of Galicia, and the oil fields of Roumania are in their hands. They stand firmly entrenched on the western front from the sea to Switzerland. Their own coastline from Holland to Denmark has thus far proved impregnable.

As against this we have done much. German commerce is driven from the sea. The German colonies are conquered. France has placed in the field one-sixth of her population. England has raised an army of five million men. From overseas a steady stream of transports crowded with our troops moves towards the heart of the Empire. The whole of the neutral world is under contribution to our arms. Its factories are turned to arsenals. British wealth—that represented before the war some twenty billion dollars in its foreign investments—is being traded for the munitions of war.

In the moral sense the Allied peoples have done still more. Belgium's defiance of tyranny, the grim devotion of those whom we used to call the light-hearted people of France, and the cheerful gayety of the "stolid" English—the nation that will not retaliate, that still plays fair when murder and piracy are turned against it, that buries with military ceremony even the raiders who have slaughtered its children, that hurls its bombs in Flanders as a new form of cricket, and turns even its dangers and its heroism into a form of sport—these are the things that have called forth the admiration of the world.

As against this the German brow is dark with the shame of the torturer and the murderer. There are cries that echo to us from the wastes of the Atlantic, and that will echo still through centuries of time.

But we only deceive ourselves if we hide the fact that the fate of the war—and with it all that is best in the world—hangs in the balance.

What are we to do?

Our soldiers in the field have done, and are doing, all that heroism can inspire and all that endurance can fulfil. Are we doing our share at home? We go about our tranquil lives scarcely disturbed. Here and there, the swift dart of death, that strikes "somewhere in France," reaches, with its double point, somewhere in Canada, a mother's heart. We pause a moment in our sympathy, and pass on. To and fro we go about our business. We pay our easy taxes, and subscribe to our so-called patriotic loan, so issued that the hungriest money-lender in New York is glad to clamor for a share of it. We eat, drink, and are merry, or, at least, not sad, professing a new philosophy of life as our sympathies grow dull to the pain and suffering that we do not share.

Are we, the people of Canada who are at home, doing our proper part to help to win the war?

If a war were conducted with the full strength of a nation, it would mean that every part of the fighting power, the labor, and the resources of the country were being used towards a single end. Each man would either be fighting or engaged in providing materials of war, food, clothes and transport for those that were fighting, with such extra food and such few clothes as were needed for themselves while engaged in the task.

This is a war economy. This is the fashion in which the energies of a nation would be directed if some omniscient despot directed them and controlled the life and activity of every man.

A nation so organized, if it were possible, would be multiplied as ten to one.

In place of it look about us. Thousands, tens of thousands, millions of our men, women and children are engaged in silly and idle services or in production that is for mere luxuries and comforts and that helps nothing in the conduct of the war. They are making pianos, gramophones, motor cars, jewelry, books, pictures, clothes in millions of yards and millions of dollars, that are mere needless luxuries, furniture that could be waited for, new houses where our old ones would still do, new railroads that lead nowhere—in short, a multitude of things that have no bearing whatever on the great fight for life and death which is going on in the world without. Such people, though they work fourteen hours a day, are but mere drones in the hive as far as the war is concerned. Every crippled soldier that comes home and looks upon our so-called busy streets feels this by instinct, with something, perhaps, like hatred in his heart.

These workers pay their taxes, it is said. By levying taxes on what they made we get the revenue that helps to pay for the war. Quite true, as far as it goes. But follow this poor argument in its tracks and you will see that it goes but an inch or so and then falls. It springs out of the perpetual confusion that arises in people's minds by mixing up the movement of money to and fro which they see and think they understand, with the movement and direction of the nation's production which they do not. The so-called War-Tax is but a small part of a man's earnings; let us say, for the sake of argument, one-tenth. This means that nine-tenths of the man's work is directed to his own use and only one-tenth for the war. Or let us put the case in the concrete. Let us suppose that the man in question makes pianos. The net result of his work is as if he gave one-tenth of his pianos to the Government. With that tenth there is no quarrel. The Government can exchange it for foreign gunpowder; this is the same, at one remove, as if the piano man made gunpowder. But the other nine-tenths is all astray. This the piano man exchanges for wheat, vegetables, meat, clothes, and so on; thus, as far as this nine-tenths of the man's work goes, he is a mere drone or parasite feeding himself and clothing himself, but not helping to fight the war at all. Worse than that. The farmer who raised the food is a parasite, too. For although food is a war material, this particular piece of food is not.

The farmer who raises food and exchanges it for pianos, pianolas, victrolas, trotting buggies, books, moving pictures, pleasure cars, and so on, is just as much a war-drone as the man who made them.

In other words, the further we look into the case the worse it gets. Since food is a war material we might have supposed at first sight that our vast agricultural population was really employed in working to win the war. Indeed a lot of nonsense to this effect has been spoken and printed during the past few years. If all our farmers were working directly for the Government, if all that they produced were handed over to the Government, and if they themselves received out of it only enough food and clothes to keep them going, then, indeed, they would be doing war work. For the Government could either use the food to feed the soldiers or sell it to the foreigners for the munitions. But this is not the case.

Exactly the same argument applies to the export trade. It is often thought that if such and such a thing is manufactured in Canada and sold abroad, then since this brings money into the country with which we can buy war material or pay soldiers, the export trade is a direct contribution towards the war. Sheer fallacy and confusion, if not worse. Export in private hands pays only its tax to the Government, not its product. The export workers exchange their nine-tenths of what they make for their own consumption. Here, again, drone trades with drone, and the country profits—apart from its little tax—nothing.

The truth is that in all these things individual greed and selfishness obscure the issue. War brings with it the peculiar phenomenon of war prosperity. This, economically, is one of the most distressing things conceivable. Here is the interpretation of it. It is as if an industrious farmer and his family had worked hard for a generation and amassed flocks and herds, barns and buildings, and good stores of provisions and grain; then, in a moment of insanity, had set to work to burn the buildings, and in the warm light of the flames kill and devour the animals, and gorge themselves with the grain and fodder, throwing the rest away. In this mad orgy one son of the family, more idiotic even than the rest, rubs his silly hands before the burning home and leers: "Father, it is warmer here and nicer, and there is more to eat, than in the old days when we worked hard and had but little food. Father, we are prosperous. We have done a good thing." Then presently the fire burns down into ashes and the night comes and the dark. And where the grain once stood and the meadows smiled in the sun, the wolves shall howl again in the gloom of the forest. And where the homestead was, there will be graves. Such is the interpretation of war.

The farmer and the family are the nation, and the idiotic son laughing beside the fire is the war theorist talking of the boom of trade.

But people either do not, or will not, know this. They still want their industry and its inflated gains, and War Prosperity with the flush on its hectic face and War Pleasure with its strident laugh, dancing away the midnight hours. In and through it all moves smug hypocrisy, suggesting the little words and phrases that are to

salve the soul; teaching the manufacturer to call himself a patriot as he pockets his private gains, and to shout for trade, more trade, that he may cram his pockets the fuller; teaching the farmer that his own fat, easy industry is war itself, and that he may count his fatted cattle in the light of his stable lantern and go to bed a patriot; teaching all the drones and parasites, the lawyers, the professors, the chefs and the piano players, the actors and the buffoons that in going on with their business they are aiding in the conduct of the war.

"Business as usual," shouted some especial idiot at the outset of the war.

The cry was like to ruin us.

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What then are we to do? By what means can we change from an economy of peace and industrial selfishness to an economy of effort and national sacrifice?

There are two ways in which this can be done: one that is heroic and impossible, another that lies easy to our hand.

The first is the method that nations adopt only in their despair, only in the last agonies of foreign conquest, as when Richmond fell, or when the Boers fought on in grim desperation across the naked veldt. Here national production ends, save only for necessary food and war supplies. Private industry is gone. Luxury is dead. All of the nation's men are gathered into a single hand. They do as they are told. They fight, they work, they die. Its women are in the fields; or they are making bandages; they tend the sick; they pray beside the dying.

Thus can a nation stand, grim and terrible, its back against the wall, till it goes down, all in one heap, glorious. In the wild onslaughts of the great conquests of the past, nations have died like this.

But for us, here and now, and in the short time that we have, this is not possible. Outside invasion could force us to it, in a jumbled wreck, with no choice of our own. But to accomplish this at a word of command inside our present complex industrial system is not possible. It is too intricate, too complicated, to be done by command from above. To enlist every man and woman in an industrial army, to direct their work and assign their rations —in other words, to create an ideal national war machine—is a task beyond the power of a Government. Years of preparation would be needed.

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What we do must be done from below, using, as best we can, the only driving force that we know—the will of the individual. We must find a means that will begin to twist and distort our national industry out of its present shape till it begins to take on the form of national organization for war.

To do this we must exchange war prosperity for war adversity, self-imposed and in deadly earnest.

The key to the situation, as far as we can unlock it, lies in

individual thrift and individual sacrifice. Let there be no more luxuries, no wasted work, no drones to keep out of the national production.

Every man, to-day, who consumes any article or employs any service not absolutely necessary, aims a blow at his country.

Save every cent. Live plainly. Do without everything. Rise early, work hard, and content yourself with a bare living. The man who does this—if he uses the saved money properly—is doing war work for his country. He may wrap his last year's coat about him and eat his bread and cheese and feel that he, too, is doing something to show the world the kind of stuff that is yet left in it.

But he must use his savings properly. That is the whole essence of the matter.

Let us see what this implies. If the idea of National Thrift were really to spread among us, there would be no more purchases of mere luxuries, or things that could be done without; no more motors, no theatres (save where the work is voluntary and the money for the war), no new clothes—they would become a badge of shame—no books, no pictures, no new furniture, no new carpets, no victrolas, and for our children no new toys save such as can be made by the affectionate industry of a father working overtime with bits of stick and cardboard.

Such a programme would threaten to wipe out manufacturers and knock down dividends like ninepins. At first sight, a manufacturer, reading such an article as this, turns pale with indignation and contempt. Let him wait. Let us follow the money that is saved a little further and see what happens to it.

Every cent of the money that can be gathered up by national thrift should be absorbed by national taxes and national loans. Our present taxes are, for war-time, ridiculously low as far as all people of comfortable, or even of decent, means are concerned. And they are made with one eye on the supposed benefit to industry. We need a blast of taxation—real taxation, income tax and all, that should strike us like a wave of German gas. As things are, we should go down before it. Armed with the new gas helmet of national thrift we could breathe it easily enough and laugh behind our goggles.

Over above the taxes we need a succession of Government patriotic loans, not money-lenders' loans at market and supermarket rates, but patriotic loans in the real sense, at a low rate of interest, let us say four per cent., and issued in bonds of twenty-five dollars, with a dollar a year as interest.

The people, one says, will not subscribe. Then, if not, let us perish. We do not deserve to win the war.

But they will subscribe.

If, under the auspices of our Government, a national campaign for thrift and investment is set on foot, if we give to the ideas all the publicity that our business brains can devise, if we advertise

it as commerce advertises its healing oils and fit-right boots and its Aphrodite corsets, then the people will subscribe, tumultuously, roaringly, overwhelmingly.

If not—if that is the kind of nation that we are—let us call our soldiers home from the Western front. They are fighting under a misunderstanding. The homes that they are saving are not worth the sacrifice.

But first let the Government—of the dominions, the provinces, the cities and the towns—itself begin the campaign of thrift. At present vast sums of money are being wasted in so-called public works, railways in the wilderness, cement sidewalks in the streets, post-offices in the towns—millions and millions that drain away our economic strength. In time of peace these are excellent. For war, unless they have a war purpose, the things are worse than useless. The work of the men who labor at them is of no value, and the food and clothes that they consume must be made by other men.

Let us be done with new streets and new sidewalks, new town halls and new railways, till the war is done. Let us walk in our old boots on the old boards, patriots all, with dollar pieces jingling in our pockets adding up to twenty-five for the latest patriotic loan.

Let us do this, and there will pour into the hands of the Government such a cascade of money that the sound of it shall be heard all the way to Potsdam.

And here enters the last step to be taken under National Thrift to convert ourselves into a war economy. The Government goes with its money to the manufacturers and interrogates them. What can you make, and you, and you? You have a plant that has made buggies and fancy carriages. These our people will not buy because now they walk. But what is it that you can make?—can you turn yourself to making trucks, waggons? You, that made boots and have lost half your trade, what about a hundred thousand boots for the army? You, that made clothes, what about doing the whole thing over in khaki?

The needs of a war Government are boundless, endless. The list of its wants is as wide as the whole range of our manufacture. The adjustment is difficult. Not a doubt of it. It cannot be done in a day. But with each successive month the process would go on and on till we would find ourselves, while working apparently each for himself, altered into a nation of war-workers, every man, in his humble sense, at the front and taking his part.

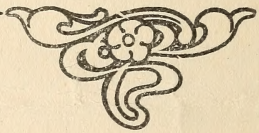
Meantime we at home are doing nothing, or next to it, for the war. While we go about our business as usual, men are breathing out their lives for us, somewhere in France.

What shall we do? STEPHEN LEACOCK.

NATIONAL THRIFT

NATIONAL SAVING

NATIONAL INVESTMENT



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